

Psych Savvy

ANCHORAGE SCHOOL DISTRICT PSYCHOLOGY DEPARTMENT

Available at <http://www.asdk12.org/depts/sped/savvy.asp>

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CYBERBULLYING

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When parents think of a bully, they might imagine a mean kid on the playground or a tough guy waiting around the corner; however, their students could have a completely different idea. These days, some of the biggest bullies may never be seen nor heard. Worst of all, these bullies have the ability to engage in “electronic bashing” twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Cyberbullying, just as physical bullying, involves intimidating, humiliating and overpowering others. Instead of using fists and spoken words, cyberbullies establish power electronically through e-mails, cell phone or pager text messages and instant messages (IM). They can be vicious, and they are everywhere!

In 2004, i-SAFE, a non-profit foundation whose mission is to educate and empower youth to engage in safe and responsible Internet use, conducted a national survey of 1,500 4th-8th graders. Results suggest that cyberbullying has become one of the most pervasive problems facing youth.

- ❖ 42% of kids indicated they have been bullied while online.
- ❖ 35% of kids reported having been threatened online.
- ❖ 58% of kids stated they have had mean or hurtful things sent to them online.
- ❖ 53% of kids admitted to having sent something mean/hurtful online to another.
- ❖ 58% of kids said they have not told an adult about the mean/hurtful online comments.

The goal of cyberbullies is to gain power and control over another person whom they perceive as weak and vulnerable. While the intent is the same, cyberbullying differs from physical bullying in several key ways. First, it is more difficult to observe because students have nearly continuous access to electronic communication, at all hours of the day. Next, the hurtful and damaging messages can be sent to a huge audience at the same time. Third, it is possible for the bully to remain unknown, especially if kids are reluctant to tell an adult. Finally, the aggressor can attack almost anywhere, often at home, which was once a safe haven. Cyberbullying promotes isolation, school avoidance, anxiety, and depression. It can also lead to physical fighting and retribution, or in extreme cases, suicide, or even murder.

The best deterrents of cyberbullying are education and parent involvement. Typically, parents are not as comfortable as their students are with electronic social networking; and, many parents do not monitor their child’s use of Internet and cell phones. Learning how to interact appropriately through electronic means is an important aspect of social skills education. Parents need to model for their children appropriate electronic communication and discuss safe Internet use. Parental awareness and monitoring of the friends, activities, and interests of their children also decreases the risk of problems. However, if cyberbullying occurs, parents can encourage students to:

- ❖ Refuse to pass along any messages that are cruel or demeaning.
- ❖ Tell an adult, parent, school psychologist, or teacher about the bullying.
- ❖ Refuse to open or read messages from cyberbullies and block the bully’s messages.
- ❖ Resist erasing the messages, as they may be needed to take action.
- ❖ Tell any friend who is cyberbullying...to STOP.
- ❖ Think about the possible consequences before clicking SEND.

Sometimes the effects of cyberbullying spill over into school. The Anchorage School District prohibits the use of cell phones and pagers during classes and denies access to most social networking sites on school computers. However, if electronic communication is sent during school activities (i.e., dances, sports, etc.) or on school property, it is important for students to alert security staff or administrators. The district has established policies relating to electronic communication and cyberbullying. If negative electronic communication creates substantial disruption to the educational process, then disciplinary and or legal actions may be taken. Here are some tips for students if they feel they are being harassed.

- ❖ Contact school officials if the message was sent during school/suggests potential harm at school.
- ❖ Contact the School Resource Officer or Anchorage Police Department if threatened with harm.
- ❖ File a complaint with the website Internet Service Provider or telephone company.
- ❖ Print copies of messages, as they may be needed to take action.

While access to electronic communication and the Internet are tremendous learning tools, they also pose risks for children and youth. Educating children about appropriate and safe use of these tools is the best way to reduce the likelihood of harm. Parents are encouraged to monitor use of electronic devices, talk with their children about the potential risks, and listen carefully if their child comes to them with a concern. Additional guidance and instruction in the appropriate use of computers for research and learning is provided by teachers at school. Together parents and teachers can offer encouragement and support to help students be safe, informed learners.

Additional Resources

Bolton, J. & Graeve, S. (2005). *No room for bullies: From the classroom to cyberspace teaching respect*. Boys Town: Boys Town Press.

Criddle, L. (2006). *Look both ways: Help protect your family on the Internet*. Redmond, WA: Microsoft Press.

Kelsey, C. M. (2007). *Generation MySpace: Helping your teen survive online adolescence*. New York: Marlowe & Company.

Willard, N. (2007). *Cyberbullying and cyberthreats: Responding to the challenge of online social aggression, threats, and distress*. Champaign, IL: Research Press.

Willard, N. (2007). *Cyber-safe kids and cyber-savvy teens: Helping young people learn to use the Internet safely and responsibly*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Websites:

<http://www.csriu.org>

<http://www.cyberbully.org>

<http://www.cyberbullying.us>

<http://www.isafe.org>

<http://www.stopcyberbullying.org>